

PS  
2718  
R511H







To Paul Hull:

There is only one of you,  
Paul, and I am glad you have  
lived in my time.

John Ritchie.











Hassan.



# HASSAN.

A VISION OF THE DESERT.

BY

JOHN RITCHIE.



CHICAGO:

F. J. SCHULTE & COMPANY; PUBLISHERS,  
298 DEARBORN ST.

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## Hassan.

God reigns! In desolate splendor lay the waste  
That, like a fiery scar seared wantonly  
By errant sun, lies broad across the brow  
Of Africa. Amid the yellow silence,  
A withered fig tree thrust its shriveled limbs  
Aloft, and into the scant umbrage crept,  
From the full flush of noonday's fervid glow,  
A wounded Arab. Round the shrunken stem  
His tawny body sinuously curled,  
And harshly, from between white teeth in agony  
Unlipped, his wild thanks dragged their guttural course  
For this poor shelter. Not for self alone.—  
Muffled by swathing folds of burnous, torn  
And stained, that ever in tender clasp he bore,  
A puling cry uprose, and, in his pain,  
With rueful joy his swart face overshone;  
For sweeter savor than the parent love  
Immortal never knew. Out where the glare  
In snaky coils writhed up, his horse, with flank  
Collapsing, flaccid neck outstretched, and by  
Eternal numbness smit, the tongue, that lolled  
Unshrinking on the burning sand. No more  
In wingèd flight was he from fell pursuit  
To bear his periled lord—no more forever!



## Hassan.

Eons agone; before the Prophet—aye!  
Ere Father Ishmael, Abraham's sinister seed,  
O'er thirsty Paran roamed—so ran the old  
Legend among the Shaanbah—lived a Sheikh  
Of courage high and valor so approved,  
The desert-dwellers of twin continents  
His glorious deeds in sounding rhythm sang  
From Western Syrtis to the farthest lunge  
Of Ras el Hada. At his death—'twas when  
With sinewy hands he rived a lion's jaws  
That, sanguine, trapped his eldest born, nor recked  
The stealthy mate—the hoary tribal seers  
Foretold the coming of a greater Hassan.  
In the sonorous stillness of the night,  
Through sequent generations, their wise men,  
Wandering, scanned the planetary aspects  
In practice of a rude astrology  
That, oft deceiving, oft renewed their hope.  
Nor unattended was their patient watch  
With dim foreboding and perplexity,  
For in the theme were Lords of houses Eight  
And Three in mystic union joined. At last  
The glittering oracles of the sky proclaimed  
The time was full. In expectation mute,  
His swarthy bandits, closer circling, drew  
About their leader's tent, and ere the line  
Meridional was passed, glad cries announced  
The hero's birth.

For him the sapient elders chose a bride  
With lineage that shamèd not his own.  
He loved her as the tiger loves his barred  
And supple mate; and she, in turn, loved him



## Hassan.

With reverence, meek, submissive—as becomes  
An Arab's consort. Time flowed on, and soon  
His sire, in course of nature ripe in years,  
Followed his fathers to their humble tomb.  
Hassan, in uncontrolled authority,  
Set out to prove by deed his star-sworn fortune.  
Fierce as the simoon's whirling blast, he scourged  
The desert routes, and, ever leading on  
His truculent followers, swept with grim  
Destruction through the Tuareg country, where  
The Tibbou cringed before his battle-yell,  
And once, by shifting dune, o'er mountain range,  
Plateau eroded, e'en to far Soudan.

Gauging all greatness by heroic feat  
Of arms, as is the custom of his race,  
He inward knew that, swol'n as was his fame,  
It failed achieving aught that by compare  
O'ertopped the towering glory of his great  
Ancestor; and, not meanly envious,  
Though by a generous emulation fired,  
He feared he his high destiny in some  
Particular betrayed. Rapine and war  
His recreation were, but, lofty aim  
Inspiring him, he strove with none save man  
Grasping his arms, or riotous beast that sheared  
Its bloody swath athwart the tribal flocks.  
Infant, the helpless spawn of foe, with him  
Was safe, and round his helpmeet's dandling knees  
A fringe of captive children grew. For this,  
When urged by murderous kinsmen to destroy,  
He brief excused himself with haughty claim  
Devout, that "Blindness still their eyes obscured."



## Hassan.

Islam for mercy the pretext gave—undreamed  
By him what his spouse knew, that in his soul,  
Ungerminate, lay the seed of sacrifice.

To them a man-child came. Him the proud Sheikh  
Worshiped with an idolatry that rose  
To equal stature with his Meccan faith.  
When, in the languorous tropic day, supine,  
He throned the palpitating minim on  
His breast, and felt about his pliant face  
The velvety touch of pulpy fingers, hotly  
Engaged in puny conflict with his beard,  
And listened to its inarticulate purl—  
Of human accents the earliest, and nearest  
To the unvoiced melody of voiced words—  
Then was the red light in his eye seduced  
To softer radiance, and the witching unrest  
That haunted him retired. Hassan loved him  
So strong that, breaking usage of the tribe—  
Who, bent on robbery, leave their broods intrenched  
By vastnesses of arid sand—he, when  
On distant razzia, took his heir and mate.

One woeful night—may it ever stand accurst!—  
Returning slackly, eastward of Ghadamès,  
Laden with plunder seized in mid-Fezzan—  
Among the living spoils a child that slept  
And suckled with his own—Hassan drew rein  
On laboring barb and patient mahry, pitching  
His sable hair-tents where the Hammada  
El Homra spreads its dolorous bosom.  
Darkness, immeasurable and starless, clothed  
The isolated camp in ebon fog,



## Hassan.

And voice of Jinn, elusive, calling hoarse  
To answering Jinnee, echoed hollow through  
The gloom. On even poise the eerie night  
Hung trembling to its lapse toward dawn, when — hark !  
Was it mere rustle of the desert air ?  
Or monstrous flight of monstrous birds ? No ! No !  
“ The Tuareg ! The Tuareg ! ” Shril pealed th’ alarm,  
And quick from ruffled tents the shrill response.  
First of his people, Hassan sprang from sleep  
Full-armed and furious as a lioness  
New-ravened of her whelps. ’Twas fate ! As when  
Great Ocean in his crested anger shoots  
A green and shaggy hand o’er Guinea’s coast  
In chaos drear, a strident front, incurved,  
Tumultuous, surged through the waking camp,  
To burst in percolating spray, whose each  
And every horrid point was nimble murder !  
Ferociously, the braver few fought on  
Till death their limbs relaxed. The hero saw  
Them fall, and cravens fly, as fly sere leaves  
Before Sirocco’s lash. Alone he stood,  
Dim focus of a hundred hungry spears,  
Undaunted. “ Yield, Arab, and mercy take ! ”  
Scornful and proud, the answer came : “ Never,  
From Tuareg dogs ! ” Ere the wild death-scream chilled  
The listening night, a timorous plaint struck down  
The valorous warrior in him and awoke  
His father heart. With instant plunge he shattered  
The bristling hedge, and from a level tent  
Drew out the wailing infant. Prompt to call,  
His murmuring steed responded, and, red-carved  
With many a gash, he rode away. The tribe  
Yet tell with pride and sadness how he rode :—



## Hassan.

Out of the noxious fumes of fight, over  
The Hammada, shimmering red from pent-up glare  
Of day released ; swift as Al Borak in flight  
Through the blue, into the murky distance far,  
Into the cavernous West ; league into league  
Gliding continuous, through night's last hours,  
Through iridescent dawn, through gathering glow  
Of Afric's torrid morn — like ride ne'er held  
Sahara's marvelous story. And, with voice  
Fall'n low and soft — which, to their ruthless hearts,  
Can never be explained — they tell how, grimed  
With curdled gore, and every membrane shrunk  
And fiercely clamorous from scourging thirst,  
He smote back pleading nature and denied  
The prayers of his own grievous hurts, but, when  
The babe its weak remonstrance urged, he, from  
A timely water-vessel, laved its chapped  
And grumous lips until the whistling gourd  
Confessed it held no more.

And now, in utmost loneliness, and sore  
Anguish, he, lovingly and covetous,  
Threw back the clinging folds to glad his eyes  
With sight of his first-born. Beard of Allah !  
"Twas the captive ! Before him passed a vision  
That wrung his savage heart. He saw his own  
Sweet innocent, foul-spiked on griding spear,  
Each severed artery spouting crimson sap,  
And all the little fingers intertwined  
In agony — a grisly apparition  
Burning through shuddering mist that drifted by  
In separate particles ! Sick with heart-pain  
And glutinous of blood, his ranging eye



## Hassan.

Fell on the child. Hot as hell's lava, hate  
In whitest fury fused his soul. As on  
A quailing hare the red-eyed eagle swoops,  
He seized and swung on high the gasping victim,  
And, with a rasping utterance that tore  
His crusted throat, he raised the terrible cry —  
“Revenge!” — such awful joy vibrating him  
As shook the mighty Danite when, within  
His lethal arms, he gathered the deep-sunk  
Pillars of Gaza’s temple, and whelmed  
Her multitudes in shrieking ruin — he  
Content with death thereat. Yet once again,  
Shrill as triumphant yell of wallowing fiend  
Forever damned clutching a fresh-won soul,  
Into the tremulous ether soaring, rushed  
The far-flung scream — “Revenge!” In bitter glee  
He laughed — and never lank hyena, squat  
Low at Algerian funeral gate,  
Such dismal ululation dragged from his  
Foul pipe — laughed horribly, so horribly  
That in the stress and throe of it he oped  
The undiscovered founts that fed his wounds,  
And, gurgling, blew, full in the infant’s face,  
A ruddy spume, which, wrung by sorest thirst,  
It eager lapped, and, pursing its poor mouth,  
Upraised a feeble wail, as to its dam,  
For more of the scarlet nourishment. The cruel  
Barbarian stayed his hand, and curiously  
Surveyed the piteous tragedy — for even  
Scowling Doom hath a speculative vein ;  
And as he gazed upon the writhing face,  
By some mysterious transmutation, it,  
To his delirious eye, the semblance took



## Hassan.

That graced his own lost floweret. Swift passed  
The image, yet, when he again essayed  
The vengeful act, his arm refused its office.  
A soul in wrestle with Omnipotence !—  
For, at command of Infinite Pity, from  
Sweet Mercy's chalice flowed a pregnant drop,  
That, by the unsearchable alchemy Divine,  
Straightway so leavened his torpid heart with sense  
Of older brotherhood, that Love reclaimed  
The throne usurped by racial hatred —love  
So rich it well-nigh cloyed. He saw, and saw  
But darkly yet, like one new-come to Truth  
And by her gleaming purity dazzled. This  
He knew : With love ineffable was all  
His soul enrapt. Sharper than sharpest pang  
That lanced his lacerated body, pierced  
The husky rattle of the infant's breath.  
For friend, for foe, he sought, to hold the young  
Life in. From near to far — far out where crouched  
The dim horizon — over all the vast  
And undulating solitude, naught moved.  
In him, in him alone, was aid — in him  
And God ! Love called to consecration.  
Nature, yet strong within him, at the last  
Awoke, and the hot love he bore the desert  
Swelled to fiery speech and passionate gesture :  
“ Ye naked rocks ! Ye sun-kissed sands ! I loved thee !  
Ye isles of green ! Ye fountains of sweet waters !  
Allah Taala ! how I loved thee ! In life,  
In death — aye ! know that in the world of shades  
I loved thee ! Allah is great ! — It was predestined !”



## Hassan.

Then, in the brooding stillness, the sacrament  
Was wrought. In the spirit of Him who suffered  
The tender buds of Jewry on His breast  
To lie, he took the drooping lamb within  
His arms, and from his wasting channels gave  
It life. On him the hollow void came down,  
And, rending, lifted, rolling its yellow shell  
In distant scroll, receding ; and he, merged  
In the mingling eternities, scarce knew  
Whether the lapping of the little tongue  
Were joyousplash of fountain flowing cool  
In palm-tree shade, or music of choral reeds  
By the rivers of Paradise, that on his ear  
Fell soft as echo of an evening prayer.  
Gently as summer cloud in crystal sky  
Dissolves, the soul of Hassan passed ; nor knew  
This thing that he had done was greater far  
Than aught, or all, the elder Hassan did !

Lone atom drowned in starved immensity !  
Desert deserted — nay ! on every hand,  
As by the Heavenly choir, eternal, ranged  
In rank on rank around the Throne, the air  
Thrilled sweetly resonant with countless flight  
Of seraphim on silvery pinion borne ;  
That sudden ceased, as if all, listening, heard  
The Voice Omnipotent, from measureless deep  
To deep, roll in reverberations large :  
“ Fate, Providence, Condition, Race, are mere  
Titles of My will—I, even I, am All ;  
And like to these, My children, all are linked  
In everlasting kinship ; not on earth  
Alone, but through the rimless space, where suns



## Hassan.

And worlds innumerable obedient heave  
Their heavy globes. Nor do I hold in scorn  
Small creed or thought, for each exists in true  
Adjustment to allotted nature — I,  
And I alone, am lastly Judge !”

A silent shadow, ever-wheeling, swept  
Its growing longitude in august march  
O'er drifted sands around the lonely  
Sanctuary ; round blasted tree and round  
The human mold, within whose rigid palm  
Lay one brown hand of the babe who slept beside  
His elder brother. Through unchanging calm  
Full-rounded Hours in still procession one  
The other trailed, and Day, grown old, drew nigh  
To Evening. Wrapped in coronal robes of fire  
Voluminous, the Sun yet lingered, loth  
To leave with dim-eyed Night his sacred ward.

Out of the East a band of warriors came—  
Sahara's human wolves. All day they followed  
The slot o'er crumbling rock and yielding sand,  
And now, with grating crush of horses' hoofs,  
With rattle of spear and clash of scimetar,  
Circling the small God's-acre, grimly viewed  
The ruin sublime. Unto their desert sense,  
As it were writ in letters of living fire,  
The dire recital glowed ; and they, who came  
With furious hate to slay, felt moving at  
Their hearts a strange compassion. Rarely touched,  
With reverent hands they gave him sepulture,  
That, in accordance with their faith, his soul  
Might know the fullness of immortal joy.



## Hassan.

Where he lay they buried him, wondering  
With equal wonder that their rancorous foe  
Should for an enemy lay down his life,  
As well that they, who never pity gave,  
Gave pity unto him. While they at one  
Another gazed, a solemn hush on them  
Descended, and unseen, save by Its work,  
Before their starting eyes the awful Hand  
Creative moved. The leprous bark with new  
Life thrilled ; along its ancient conduits coursed  
The singing sap, and trunk and branch and twig  
Their cylinders in fullest contour drew.  
In emerald beauty nascent foliage sprang  
To view, bending in graceful homage before  
The God who called it into being. Buds,  
New-born, expanding, burst, unfolding blooms  
That wide diffused their balmy redolence,  
And withered but to herald pendent fruit  
Which riped its purple succulence, embossed  
On shield of green. From a perennial fount  
A tinkling rivulet ran o'er pebbly reach,  
Bubbling its joy in liquid melody,  
Re-echoing sweet from guardian banks fresh-draped  
With trailing vines in tangled maze enmeshed,  
And starred with flowers that shyly blushed, or blazed  
In haughty splendor on the beryl slopes.  
Against the glowing sky, in outer range,  
Were lofty palms, rearing their burnished crowns  
In simple majesty, about whose knees  
Dew-jeweled grasses clustered thick, curling  
Their delicate lengths luxuriant, and all  
The moist interstices exhaled the breath  
Of humid earth ; while from the tabernacle



## Hassan.

Above floated the rippling song of birds,  
Where song of bird was never heard before.  
As Moussa from the burning bush retired,  
The Imoshagh drew back, and, with new thoughts,  
In meditation went their way in peace.

Years trod on years, and now, at even-tide  
The straggling caravan finds there the rest  
It seeks, and bearded merchants on their mats,  
Praying with grave faces to the East, give thanks  
To Allah for the sacrifice. And when  
The night-wind from the desert gently blows,  
Stirring the tree to murmurous speech, among  
The world of voices, one, that none but true  
Believer hears, will softly whisper, "I AM HASSAN!"













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